

Building a Foundation

By

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certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Building a Foundation

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## Abstract

Building a Foundation examines my personal history growing up in a Midwestern, conservative, farming community, within a family of boys. This exhibition of drawings and prints explores ideas of identity and the American male experience, and the distinct gender roles acted out by my father and mother. Through the use of vibrant colors, and images of various tools, everyday objects, and wooden structures, I am creating an alternate reality. In this space, I can question my past and present life as a man within contemporary Midwestern American culture.

## Building a Foundation

This exhibit, Building a Foundation, consists of fourteen unique pieces and explores the space between my father's work shed and my mother's kitchen. Growing up in a conservative, farming community, within a family of boys, I have come to question my American, male experience, and how I relate to hand tools, domestic objects, and various structures. Coming to terms with my own understanding of manual work, play, and identity as a man has been a large aspect of my current creative process. This exhibit provides an alternate reality that blurs the clearly defined roles within the rural community in which I was raised.

Within Building a Foundation, I've come to realize how important my background has been in shaping my artistic practice, and my perception of the world around me. My memories of the farm and attending carpentry school have given me an admiration and love for tools and the objects of manual labor. Being productive, and taking on the responsibilities of a provider has always been an expectation within my family; I saw this demonstrated by my father and other men around me. Questioning these expectations of masculinity, I've created a world that blends the traditional gender roles. By placing hand tools, building materials, dishware, and various structures in a new context and move them to an alternate reality without hierarchy or division; I am able to question my own belief systems.

When I was a child, my family would visit my grandmother's house in Iowa for Thanksgiving and Christmas. In the kitchen, my mother, grandmother, and other female relatives would be preparing the family meal. This space was always busy, with pots and pans moving between the oven and sink in the small kitchen. As the meal came closer to fruition, dishes would be washed and stacked neatly on the table, ready to be placed. This room was filled with



warm conversation of distant relatives and approaching dinner preparations. Through a side passage from the kitchen, I would quietly walk into where the men were sitting. The living room was a small room where my father and male relatives' conversation revolved around crop prices, landowners, and new barns being raised. I liked walking between these distinct spheres, and I soaked up the way in which these two worlds were described. In the adjoining dining room, where we would all eventually sit down to eat, my grandmother kept a wooden cabinet full of Currier and Ives dishware made by the Royal China Company. I remember being enthralled with the delicate line work around the rims of these plates, and the various narratives and scenes depicted. The images on these dishes revolved around rural America during the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century, and helped shape a middle class identity for the growing nation. This Currier and Ives dishware described farmers busily bringing in crops during the summer, or horse drawn sleds whisking groups of cheerful people across a snowy landscape to attend a party at a winter cottage. Every piece had a unique image and narrative, which I connected to my family and the many stories told about my relatives and their farms.

Building a Foundation travels between the two gender spheres that I experienced as a child by using imagery of floating tools, dishes, or building materials. Many of my drawings embrace a sense of transitional space where objects and purpose are questioned and reimagined. Approaching these images, the viewer comes to understand that the scenes are in a state of movement and have contradicting perspectives. A piece within this exhibit that questions the reality of gravity, light, and place is *Solid Ground* (figure 1). This intaglio print with hand coloring describes an act of finding equilibrium or balance.



Figure 1. *Solid Ground* – Spite-bite aquatint, hand coloring, 22”x 30”, 2013

Creating tension between these objects gives them a theatrical nature and demands that we question the potential story of these depicted dishes and wood scraps. The viewer is coming into the scene mid-act and is not sure how it will unfold.

Another drawing in the exhibit that emphasizes this idea is *Please and Thank You* (Figure 2), which describes various dishes and kitchenware hovering in a field of white. A sense of upheaval and uncertainty, but also joy and wonder, accents this artwork. There are many

interpretations and ways to read the emotion, ranging from excitement and play, to violence. In viewing *Please and Thank You*, due to its expansive size, we sink into the space and the many layers of objects being described. The dishes and utensils are not perfectly formed and there is a sense of fluidity to these otherwise rigid kitchen tools. The liquid line quality used in this artwork reflects an understanding of how these objects are in a transitional space, continually changing.



Figure 2. Detail: *Please and Thank You* - Ink on paper, 40"x 92", 2013

The floating nature of this artwork, the way it deals with *space* and repeated imagery was inspired by Toile de Jouy fabric pattern. While working on this drawing, I came to view the large, white sheet of paper as a piece of fabric. Due to its size, the roll of paper came to feel like a bolt of fabric.



Figure 3. *Burning the Midnight Oil* – Ink on paper, 29.5”x 41.5”, 2013

Another drawing that emphasizes this understanding of alternate space and creating a new reality is the artwork, *Burning the Midnight Oil* (Figure 3). This drawing questions the solidity, weight, and ground of these wooden blocks set against the background of fireworks. With the fireworks exploding behind the stacked purple blocks, we do not see a cast shadow connecting these two stacks to the ground on which they are sitting. They have the effect of floating above the earth, transforming into something else entirely. These

objects that I create within space do not always fit together in a realistic manner, but allude to a shift in reality in the way that they create a dialogue with one another.



Along with dishware, this exhibit includes hammers and other carpentry tools that would be found on a construction site. I've always been fascinated by the hammer's form and its utilitarian function. Choosing to depict this tool within my work, I am embracing the various



Figure 4. *Bloom* – 20" diameter, Ink on paper, 2013

ways the hammer can be viewed and understood. This specific hand tool is visually compelling because it contains so many potential outcomes, it can be used to build something, or it can be wielded to tear a structure apart. The hammer can even be used as a weapon. These purposes can be interchanged, and the purpose is dependent on the individual wielding it.

The hammer can be used to alter or change the world in which we live, and how we interact with what we know. This idea is present with the piece *Bloom* (Figure 4). The hammer within the piece is constructed of small delicate marks that are similar to embroidery stitches. This delicate mark is in contrast to what we know or understand of the utilitarian tool, and it becomes almost ephemeral or transparent. The light pink, flower-like wash behind the hammer suggests the potential for feminizing the identity of this otherwise masculine object. Filling the circular piece of paper, this flower pattern indicates an ever-moving cyclical motion of construction and

deconstruction. In placing the hammer at a slight angle within the frame, I am activating movement within the piece. The exhibit, Building a Foundation takes these familiar tools and objects, reworks and questions their innate qualities and revels in the act of reconstruction.

The persistence of line through the drawings is an integral aspect of this thesis exhibit. The drawn line creates a distinction between various spaces with my artwork, with line quality ranging from playful and expressive to diligent and controlled. I associate creating line with the act of work and keeping busy. This activity of filling space relates to my need to continually stay productive, whether that comes across as playful and whimsical or very intentionally planned. The lines I use describe and delineate the various tools and objects within my alternate reality. Using pen and brush, my line varies between fluid marks and precise marks. This can be seen within many of my drawings and prints. Hive of Activity (Figure 5) is a good example of how

these lines have varying qualities and attributes.

At times, these gestural and tightly controlled lines overlap and struggle for command of the space. Using these two distinct ways of rendering line, both the liquid and concrete,



Figure 5. Hive of Activity – 22"x30" Monotype, Ink on paper, 2013

I am acting out an interior dialogue of what it means to work and play within my artwork.

Within two of my ink drawings in Building a Foundation, I have assembled large, wooden structures. These monuments are strange and shrouded in mystery, and the builders are no longer present. Built out of wooden planks, we don't know the purpose or intention of these buildings. In creating these drawings, I am playfully questioning physical labor and human intention. Within the piece, *Laying Down on the Job* (Figure 6), the viewer sees a large arch that is securely nailed to the ground. This gateway embraces its own significance and demands attention due to its overpowering presence. It is unclear whether this structure is unfinished or is a remnant of something long forgotten. On the ground, we see the shadow of the arch, which grounds the broad, gestural sweep of the structure. The shadow, which connects to the physical arch, creates a cyclical line that moves us through the image. Creating this work of art in a monotone red gives it a dream like quality, which transports the viewer to an alternate reality.



Figure 6. *Laying Down on the Job* – 40"x60" Ink on paper, 2013



Using bright, cheerful colors throughout Building a Foundation became an important element in how I personally view these pieces of art. These colors relate to various influences such as textiles, carpentry tools, cartoons, and children's toys. This is particularly evident in the

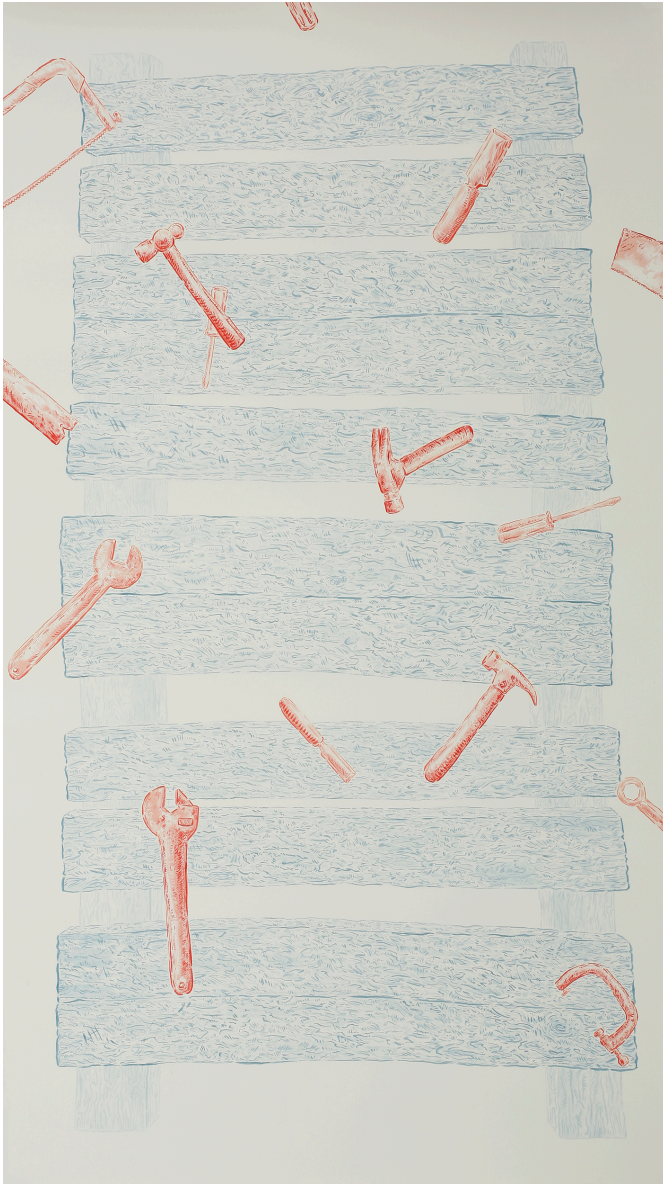


Figure 7. Labor of Love – 40"x72" Ink on paper, 2013

piece *Labor of Love* (Figure 7). The tools that I've chosen to describe are bright orange, set against a ladder or bridge-like structure made of turquoise lumber. Seeing the tools being described as colorful instruments forces us to question their purpose: are they functional, decorative, or do they serve a different use than we think? Behind these two layers of imagery is the glow of the white paper. The hand tools are flat and awkwardly placed, some are very specific tools and others are only quickly rendered signifiers. These tools, in a cascade motion, invite the interpretation that somehow a toolbox has been dumped or has slipped, and now these tools are falling through space. Or perhaps instead of falling, they are lying flat on this wooden structure,

with the viewer looking down upon this forgotten worksite. By using bright colors, I am able to alter the perception of these instruments.



The imagery of fireworks permeates Building a Foundation. Due to working with objects from distinct gender spheres, I wanted to also use an element that could tie these roles together through an act of celebration, or play. Fireworks signify leisure and celebration of life. They also create a new understanding of the situations in which these tools and objects inhabit. Within the drawings, these bursts of color also became very pattern-like, creating a nice contrast from the objects within the drawings. Going between these two gender spheres is very important to the exhibit and how we visually *see* space. Explosions appearing and disappearing in the night sky, and altering an environment with light, sound, and experience touches on this idea of transformative space. The fireworks assist in taking us to this alternate reality just like the Currier & Ives dishware explored both work and leisure within the delicate narratives.

Using visual language from my childhood and present life in Building a Foundation, I am examining what it means to work and play as a man. With images of hand tools, dishes, and monumental structures placed in imagined space, I am questioning both my perception of the world, and the Midwestern community in which I was raised. Bringing creative influences from both my youth and art history has assisted me in creating artwork that revels in labor and the various tools I use to accomplish daily tasks. Being able to change the functionality of these tools and dishes, I am opening myself up to the possibility of exploring and understanding various views of the world. Building a Foundation is about exploring the environment in which I was raised, and playfully questioning assumptions and belief systems associated with gender roles.

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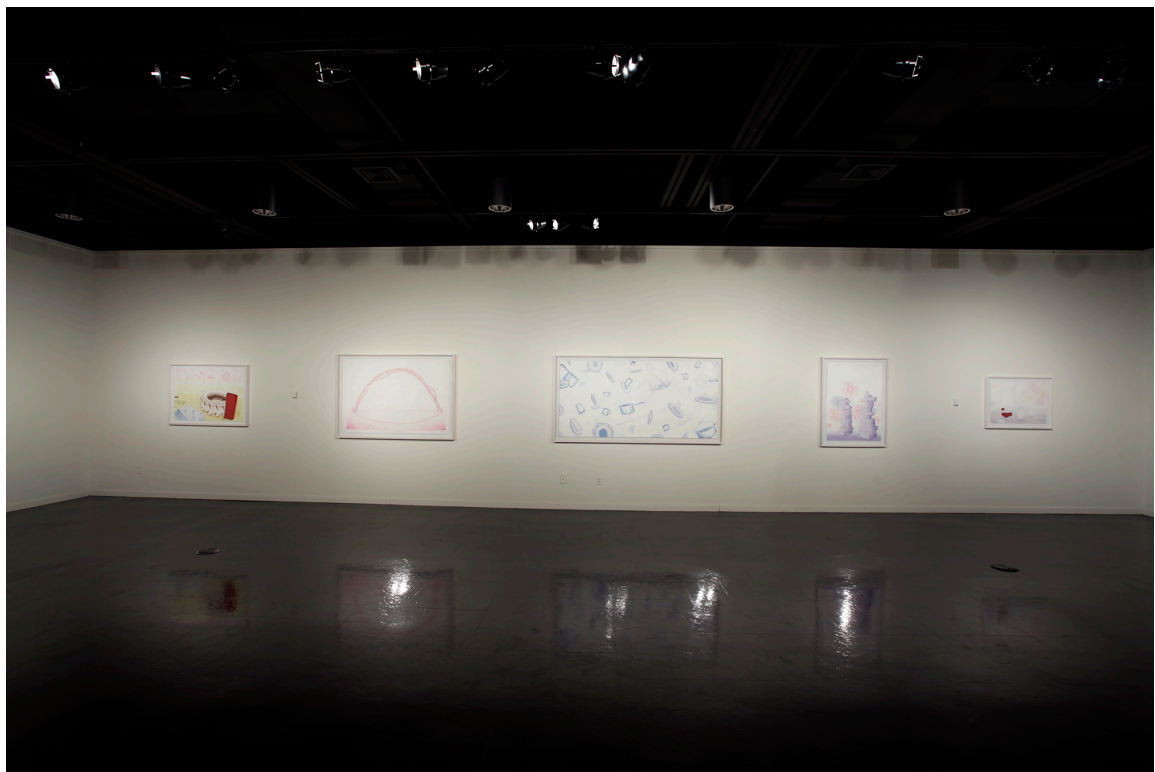


Figure 8. Exhibition view



Figure 9. Exhibition view



Figure 10. Exhibition view



Figure 11 Exhibition view